DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 456 958 RC 023 146

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TITLE Creating Moral Citizens: Answers from the Ancient, Non-Western World.
PUB DATE 2000-07-00
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Association for Moral Education (Glasgow, Scotland, July 7-11, 2000).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *American Indian Education; Ancient History; Community Role; Educational History; *Educational Needs; Ethical Instruction; Foreign Countries; *Moral Values; *Nonformal Education; Teacher Student Relationship; *Values Education
IDENTIFIERS *Character Education; *India

ABSTRACT

A review of educational systems in ancient India and traditional Native America reveals that these cultures went beyond superficial, conventional, or rule-based morality and trained thoughtful, principled wisdom. Common characteristics that may have contributed to training character and creating moral citizens include: a strong sense of community; a communal choice to genuinely value morality; a sense of direct, lifelong accountability to one's teacher, family, and society; the maintenance of high standards in education, character, and citizenship; consistency between moral teaching and behavior by teachers, parents, and community; and the consideration of morality as a universal element of instruction, integral to every domain of the curriculum and life. Since the modern Western world is failing to train moral citizens, perhaps we could incorporate one or more of the characteristics of ancient systems. Some possible routes include mobilizing parents to demand character training in schools; training teachers to teach and model morality; selecting teachers based in part on their moral understanding; educating parents to consistently enforce and support good character; incorporating morality as a universal element in the curriculum; and supporting good character in teachers with respect, higher status, more money, or better students. (Contains 13 references.) (TD)

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ED 456 958

Creating moral citizens: Answers from the ancient, non-Western world

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Introduction

The question of how to create moral citizens is a perennial human problem. This question is not restricted to modern times or to Western culture. Whereas appropriate answers to this question are interrelated with time and culture, and any answer must be suitable for a society's present needs and values, this paper suggests that useful insights may be garnered by searching through history or through other cultures. Without recommending wholesale importation of the answers provided by other cultures, their insights could inform our present discussion.

It is common to look to history as a fruitful source of answers. It is less common to look outside of one's culture for answers. This paper attempts both by examining the ways in which moral citizens were created in two pre-Christian, non-Western cultures: ancient India, and traditional Native America.

Both the issues surrounding this question of creating moral citizens, and the answers, are complex. One important component of an answer lies in the society's cultural expectations and standards that drive the creation of moral citizens. A critical arena where such standards operate is in the educational system. Social expectations determine, or at least set the parameters for, teacher excellence, teaching methods, curricular content, graduation requirements, and parental and community involvement. Naturally this relationship is bi-directional, since teachers are also citizens, and since graduates become the citizens who set the standards for the next generation.

The focus of this paper, therefore, is the role of society and of the educational system in the making of moral citizens in two ancient, non-Western cultures.

Ancient India

In ancient India, teachers were held to the highest standards of expertise. Students traveled long distances to apply for study with the best teachers. Teachers who were less than highly expert lost their students, and were expected to improve themselves by declaring themselves students again, and studying with better teachers. Good character was considered the most critical component of a teacher's expertise (Altekar, 1944; Mookerji, 1998).

Students were tested before admission. Both their character and their intellectual attainments were evaluated. Students who fell short in academics were often admitted provisionally and provided additional tutoring, but students who were found deficient in character were given no second chances (Altekar, 1944).

Students lived with their teachers, and education was conducted one-on-one, or in very small groups. The feeling between teacher and student was as close as that of a parent and child, based on mutual love and mutual respect, and teachers were expected to take responsibility for every aspect of their students' lives (Altekar, 1944; Keay, 1959). The student-teacher relationship was for life. If a student was less than earnest, or failed to make daily progress, the student lost the teacher's time and attention; not only was this consequence humiliating, but it had an effect on the student comparable to disappointing a beloved parent (Altekar, 1944; Mookerji, 1998).

Moral education was not a separate topic for study, but was integrated throughout the curriculum, reflecting the societal belief that every thought and act, every domain of knowledge, had a moral quality. Specific content was taught using methods similar to those employed today: direct exhortation; moral tales; the recounting of morally heroic deeds of ancient heroes, whom students were expected to emulate; and constant modeling of moral thought, speech and behavior by the teacher (Altekar, 1944; Keay, 1959).

Students did not graduate until they were declared intellectually competent and a moral person by their teacher. A moral person in ancient India was characterized by humility, benevolence, tolerance, and generosity; genuine respect toward everyone, but especially elders; living a disciplined and productive life; and, at best, using such strong character as a foundation for a lifelong pursuit of spirituality. Education was regarded as the best agency for maintaining and improving society (Banerji, 1972; Keay, 1959).

Character was so emphasized that it was considered a more important educational goal than intellectual attainments (Altekar, 1944). The high standards for character were enforced by a student's parents, and by society. The character of a student reflected not only on the teacher, whose reputation, and often livelihood, was dependent on the quality of his students, but also on the student's parents and family. People of good character were honored and brought honor, whereas persons of low character were severely condemned and avoided (Banerji, 1972; Keay, 1959; Mookerji, 1998; Nanavaty, 1973).

Morality was the foundation of the Indian concept of citizenship. Good citizenship included repaying the debt incurred to the society that had provided education and sustenance. This was accomplished by maintaining and improving the culture, and by becoming a stable and active member of society by marrying, having children, and upholding moral and religious traditions and practices (Banerji, 1972; Nanavaty, 1973).

Good character and intellectual attainments were not achievements to be demonstrated upon graduation and then forgotten. The community actively monitored morality on a continuous basis. There was also lifelong accountability to one's teacher. Teachers spent a portion of each year traveling to visit their adult students, and they tested the students for both intellect and character during every visit. Adults therefore spent considerable time in ongoing rehearsal of what was already learned, and in making further progress both intellectually and morally (Altekar, 1944).

Traditional Native America

In traditional Native America, teachers were also expected to be fully expert, and, while maintaining their knowledge base, to actively focus and apply their knowledge and experiences until they reached a high level of wisdom. The wisdom expected of those who dedicated themselves to teaching was not just expert professional knowledge in whatever domain they taught, but also full spiritual insight. The community as a whole reached consensual judgment of each teacher's expertise and wisdom, and any teacher falling short in either professional knowledge or spiritual attainment was simply sent no students (Friesen, 1993).

Parents and teachers together made an individual decision on the education of each child. Based on the child's natural leanings, family and community needs, and the availability of a teacher who matched the child's needs, both profession and teacher were selected. Students still had to request admission for study with the teacher (Antone, 1992; Deloria, 1994; Nicholas, 1991; Williams, 1948).

Just as in ancient India, teachers taught one-on-one or in very small groups. Students did not fail: teachers spent as much time, and provided as much individually tailored instruction, as each student needed to attain mastery (Antone, 1992; Deloria, 1994; Nicolas, 1991). Since teachers and students were generally part of the same community, and lived nearby, or were even related, the student-teacher relationship was likewise for life. Students did not finish their study until their teacher declared them expert, and even so, they had to maintain mastery and continue to progress throughout their lives.

Morality was thought to be integral with every domain of life. Native Americans believed that everyone and everything was a manifestation of spirituality, and existed in perpetual relationship. Each species had its special role to play and duties to undertake in this cosmic order (this is the Native American concept of "place"). Morality thus meant humility about one's own accomplishments and

importance; respect toward everyone and everything in the cosmos; and never speaking or acting without due reflection on all of the consequences, since in perpetual relationship, the consequences could be broad and enduring. These beliefs naturally led to qualities such as gentleness and forbearance, and also underlay a very strong work ethic (Cajete, 1994; Deloria, 1994; Talayesva, 1963).

In their early years, Native American children were taught primarily by their grandparents and other family elders, whose mission was to instill an acute sense of the moral way. This was accomplished through direct exhortation and correction, recounting tribal myths and tales of heroes, and relentless modeling by all adults in the community. Public humiliation and even ostracism were imposed on adults who did not act morally, which, in the context of Native American beliefs, were severe consequences (Miller, 1988; Nicholas, 1991). In later education, content knowledge was fully integrated with morality, so that the student's consideration and understanding of moral dimensions, especially consequences, came to be consistent and pervasive. Intellectual, moral, and physical attainments reflected directly on one's family and one's community, and became a matter of public pride (Nicholas, 1991; Talayesva, 1963).

The community exercised immediate and complete control over educational standards. Students demonstrated proficiency through performance at public functions, and their achievements in every domain were continually monitored by the community throughout their lives. In addition to the dedicated or specialized teachers, every adult also served as a teacher to any child who needed or wanted instruction (Friesen, 1993), and as a model of exemplary moral behavior (Talayesva, 1963), which must have produced a feeling of communal responsibility for education and for morality unparalleled in the modern, Western world.

Principles of moral education in the ancient, non-Western world

Even such a brief survey of the educational systems of two ancient, non-Western societies demonstrates a collection of shared characteristics (in fact, many ancient societies shared these characteristics (Evans, forthcoming). Some of the more salient characteristics that may have contributed to training character, and creating and maintaining moral citizens, are as follows:

- A strong sense of community, including a sense of belonging and pride.
- A communal choice to genuinely value morality.

- A sense of direct, continuous, lifelong accountability to one's teacher, to one's family, and to society.
- Enduring commitments between student and teacher, and between student and society.
- The maintenance of high standards in education, in character, in citizenship.
- Consistency between moral teaching and moral behavior by teachers, parents, and community leaders.
- Morality as a universal element of instruction, integral to every domain of the curriculum (and life).

In the modern, Western world, we are lacking these elements. We have little sense of community; we rarely appear even to value morality; there is little direct accountability by teachers, students, or the educational system, despite recent efforts in this regard; there is little continuity or enduring commitment between teacher and student, especially below the graduate level; our educational and community standards, particularly for character, have been permitted to slip; our elders do not, for the most part, demonstrate consistency between moral exhortation and their own moral behavior; and moral education, when taught at all, is often treated as an unrelated domain. Many students graduate without even being able to recognize a moral dilemma when confronted with one, and certainly do not consistently take moral consequences into account when making decisions.

Society, of course, has changed, and this drives the educational changes, but since we are failing to train moral citizens, perhaps we could incorporate one or more of the characteristics of ancient systems. The following are suggested as a few of the possible routes:

- Educators could mobilize parents to demand the training of character in schools.
- Teachers could be better trained to teach and model morality. Ideally, teachers would be selected based in part on their moral understanding.
- Parents could be educated to consistently enforce and support good character.
- Morality could be incorporated as a universal element in the curriculum.
- Parents and the community could support good character in teachers, not by placing yet another unrewarded demand on teachers, nor with punitive restrictions for lapses, but with respect, or higher status, or more money, or better students.

Since some of these strategies have already been implemented, it is likely that more than one component is needed to form an integral whole. If attempted, change would undoubtedly happen slowly at first, gaining momentum exponentially over several educational generations. This would necessitate embracing risk, and acting out of faith, in the early stages.

Naturally this discussion leaves unanswered questions. Although the definition of morality is surprisingly consistent, across cultures and even across time, nonetheless the working definition is community-specific. The communal sense of accountability and support for the ideas and practice of character was certainly more easily accomplished in a smaller community. The stability of the community no doubt also contributed. Of greatest interest is the answer to the question of how these ancient cultures went beyond superficial, conventional, or rule-based morality, and appear, according to written documents and oral tradition, to have trained thoughtful, principled wisdom. This was surely their greatest achievement, and one worthy of being replicated at any cost.

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